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STEPHEN E. AMBROSE

**WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHOR CELEBRATING
THE BICENTENNIAL OF THE LOUISIANA PURCHASE**



“Ambrose takes us into the interior of an adventure . . . involving the greatest expedition ever undertaken in the history of this country.” —Paul Theroux, *Chicago Tribune*

UNDAUNTED COURAGE

**MERIWETHER LEWIS, THOMAS JEFFERSON,
AND THE OPENING OF THE AMERICAN WEST**

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Undaunted Courage



MERIWETHER LEWIS,
THOMAS JEFFERSON,
AND THE
OPENING OF THE AMERICAN WEST

Stephen E. Ambrose

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“Of courage undaunted, possessing a firmness & perseverance of purpose which nothing but ~~impossibilities could divert from it’s direction, careful as a father of those committed to his~~ charge, yet steady in the maintenance of order & discipline, intimate with the Indian character, customs & principles, habituated to the hunting life, guarded by exact observation of the vegetables & animals of his own country, against losing time in the description of objects already possessed, honest, disinterested, liberal, of sound understanding and a fidelity to truth so scrupulous that whatever he should report would be as certain as if seen by ourselves, with all these qualifications as if selected and implanted by nature in one body, for this express purpose, I could have no hesitation in confiding the enterprize to him.”

—THOMAS JEFFERSON
on Meriwether Lewis

The Lewis and Clark Expedition
Up the Missouri
Headwaters of the Missouri
Crossing the Bitterroot Mountains
Exploring the Mouth of the Columbia
Traveler's Rest

Introduction

ON THE NATION'S twenty-seventh birthday, July 4, 1803, President Thomas Jefferson proclaimed, in the pages of the Washington, D.C., *National Intelligencer*, that the United States had just purchased from Napoleon "Louisiana." It was not only New Orleans, but all the country drained from the west by the Mississippi River, most especially all the Missouri River drainage. That was 825,000 square miles, doubling the size of the country for a price of about fifteen million dollars—the best land bargain ever made.

That same July 4, the president gave to Meriwether Lewis a letter authorizing him to draw on any agency of the U.S. government anywhere in the world anything he wanted for an exploring expedition to the Pacific Ocean. He also authorized Lewis to call on "citizens of any nation to furnish you with those supplies which your necessities may call for" and signed "this letter of general credit for you with my own hand," thus pledging the faith of the United States government. This must be the most unlimited letter of credit ever issued by an American president.

The next day, July 5, 1803, Lewis set off. His purpose was to look for an all-water route across the western two-thirds of the continent, and to discover and describe what Jefferson had bought from Napoleon.

The Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis and Clark Expedition stretched the boundaries of the United States from sea to shining sea. Thus July 4, 1803, was the beginning of today's nation. The celebration in 1976 was designated as the Bicentennial, and that was appropriate for the original thirteen colonies, but it was with the Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis and Clark Expedition that the United States west of the Mississippi River became a part of the nation. Therefore July 4, 2003, can be regarded as the real Bicentennial.

The Louisiana Purchase in 1803 added everything west of the Mississippi River and east of the Continental Divide to the United States, including today's Louisiana, Arkansas, parts of northeastern Texas, Oklahoma, eastern Colorado, and Minnesota. In their exploration, Lewis and his partner, William Clark, described Missouri, Kansas, Iowa, Nebraska, the Dakotas, and Montana, all a part of the Purchase. And the expedition made possible the American acquisition of the great Northwest Empire—Idaho, Washington, Oregon. Clark joined Lewis in October 1803, at Clarksville, Indiana Territory, across the Ohio River from Louisville, Kentucky. Thus it was Lewis who became the first man ever to cross the North American continent in today's United States. And it was Clark who, on November 7, 1805, wrote the immortal line, "*Ocean in view! O! the joy!*"

Meriwether Lewis was present on March 9, 1804, as the official American witness, at St. Louis, where the first American flag was raised west of the Mississippi River. Later, he and William Clark raised the Stars and Stripes at their campsites along the Missouri River, in the Rocky Mountains, and on the Columbia River, also the first ever, capped by the one at the westernmost camp, near Astoria, Oregon, on the Pacific Ocean.

Thomas Jefferson did so many things of such magnitude that it would be foolish to declare that this that action—the Declaration of Independence, religious freedom, the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, and many others—was the greatest. In the Northwest Ordinance he made certain that when the population of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin was large enough these territories would come into the Union as fully equal states. They would have the same number of senators and representatives as the original

thirteen states, they would elect their own governors, and so on. Jefferson was the first man who ever had such a thought. All previous empires had been run by the “mother country,” with the king appointing the governors, and the legislature in the mother country’s capital setting the laws. Jefferson said no: the territories would not be colonies, they would be states, and they would be equal to the original members of the Union. No one knows how things might have turned out if Washington, D.C., had tried to govern the territories west of the Appalachian Mountains.

Surely the best thing Jefferson ever did as president was the Louisiana Purchase. The Federalist Party opposed the Purchase, arguing that nowhere in the Constitution is power granted to the President to purchase additional lands and that in any case the United States should not pay money, of which it had too little, for land, of which it had too much. Jefferson rejoined that nowhere in the Constitution does it say that the president cannot purchase additional lands. And in making the argument that cheap lands in the West were the last things the United States should pay for, the Federalists dug their own grave.

Jefferson also applied the principles of the Northwest Ordinance to the Louisiana Purchase territory—and later, by extension, to the Northwest Empire. Thus Jefferson, more than any other man, created an empire of liberty that stretched from sea to shining sea.

The next-best thing Jefferson did as president was to organize, set the objectives, and write the orders for an exploring expedition across the country. He then picked Meriwether Lewis to command it, and, by Lewis’s insistence, William Clark became co-commander.

Since 1803 and the return of the expedition in 1806, every American everywhere has benefited from Jefferson’s purchase of Louisiana and his setting in motion the Lewis and Clark Expedition. And we all live in a democracy and enjoy complete religious liberty, thanks to Jefferson.



I am often asked, “What is the secret to being a successful author?” My reply, always, is: “Marry an English major.” Before suppertime, at cocktail hour, Moira listens to me reading whatever I’ve written a day, then tells me how good it is (she has been married to a writer for a very long time and knows always what to say first), then says, “But,” and tells me to make more of this, less of that, change this word or that image, whatever. She is also there for the research. She has sat beside me, looking at documents, at libraries ranging from the Eisenhower Library in Abilene, Kansas, to the Nixon Collection at Yorba Linda, California, to the Bancroft Library in Berkeley, California. Field research has taken us on a Union Pacific train from Omaha to Sacramento; to Normandy, London, Paris, Belgium, Germany; a couple of times to Italy; lately to the South, Central, and North Pacific.

We were together for every inch of the Lewis and Clark route. Once, in 1976, we were backpacking on the Lolo Trail in the Bitterroot Mountains. She was behind me (where else?) and said, “Walking in Lewis’s footsteps makes my feet tingle.” That is the kind of line you can get from an English major.

The second secret is: “Get a good editor.” My editor for the past two decades and many books has been, and will always be, Alice Mayhew. She is famous, for good reason. When I first told her I wanted to write about Meriwether Lewis for my next book, she insisted that I put in as much Tom Jefferson as possible. Because, she said, people never get tired of reading about Jefferson. She was, as she almost always is, right.

It was Alice who came up with the title for this book. I wanted to call it *Of Courage Undaunted*, the opening phrase of Jefferson’s marvelous one-sentence description of Lewis, the finest praise any member of the president’s official family ever received from the man himself. Alice changed it to *Undaunted Courage*. That is not only an exact description of Lewis, but of Alice as well. She is the only editor in the whole world with the courage to edit Thomas Jefferson.

That was almost a decade ago. Much has happened since. Moira and I are getting close to the time when the realization of the dream we had then, described in the last paragraph of the Acknowledgments will come true, for our grandchildren are now in high school.

The best thing that has happened is the number of people who canoe the Missouri and Columbia Rivers, who backpack over the Bitterroots, who visit Lewis and Clark sites all along the Trail. The Bicentennial years, 2003 to 2006, will see an upsurge in the visitation. We want every American to go see at least a part of the trail. It is your duty, your privilege, as an American. We urge you to take on photographs, leave only footprints, as you paddle in the wake of the Corps of Discovery or hike in the footsteps.

Bring along a copy of the Journals of Lewis and Clark. Either the Biddle edition, or the Moulton edition, or De Voto's one-volume abridgment, or any of the other abridgments. And at your campfire, whether on the Missouri River in Missouri or Kansas or Nebraska or Iowa or the Dakotas or Montana, or on Lemhi Pass, or in the Bitterroot Mountains in Idaho, or on the Columbia River in Washington or Oregon, read aloud from the journals. Often, in some stretches nearly always, your campfire will be at the site where Lewis or Clark wrote his account of what happened to the Corps of Discovery that day, describing territory you have just covered, telling about the adventures the men went through on that spot. I guarantee that if you practice you can learn to read well the run-on sentences the captains indulged themselves in, and that when you do, you will have your children or friends or parents whoever is sitting around that campfire leaning forward just a bit, listening intently, so as not to miss a word. Like you, like me, like every American, they want to know: what happened next?

STEPHEN E. AMBROSIO

August 2000

Acknowledgments

FOR TWO DECADES, I have wanted to write about the Lewis and Clark Expedition. As a biographer, I was drawn to the two captains and wanted to do Lewis, but other projects intervened; besides, there already existed a good biography, written by Richard Dillon and published in 1965. Since I like Clark as much as I do Lewis, and since there was no biography of Clark, in 1992 I called my friend Harry Fritz of the History Department at the University of Montana to ask if he knew of anyone doing Clark. Harry said James Ronda was writing a biography. Since Ronda is one of the leading Lewis and Clark scholars in the country, a fine historian and writer, that was that for Clark.

But then Harry pointed out that in the thirty years since Dillon's biography there has been a tremendous amount of research and writing on Lewis and the expedition. Many new documents by and about Lewis have appeared since 1965, including those in the revised edition of Donald Jackson's great work, *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*. Further, there are scores of outstanding articles published in *We Proceeded On*, the quarterly journal of the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation. Best of all, there was the new edition of the journals edited by Gary Moulton and published by the University of Nebraska Press, and including among other gems Lewis's journal of his trip down the Ohio River in 1803. Using these new materials and others, Lewis and Clark historians have published more than twenty monographs with various university presses on different aspects of the expedition.

Harry urged me to do an updated biography of Lewis incorporating the new material. Thus this book.

I am grateful to all the Lewis and Clark scholars who have preceded me. I owe a special thanks to Arlen Large and Gary Moulton, who read the manuscript and saved me many errors, while providing innumerable insights.

A special thanks to John Howard, Hans von Luck, and Dick Winters for teaching me what makes for a good company commander.

I give up on finding some new way to say what a wonderful editor Alice Mayhew is, but I must thank her for using her blue pencil to curb some of my boyish enthusiasm for Captain Lewis. Her combination assistant, chief of staff, and executive officer, Elizabeth Stein, is a model of efficiency, patience, and good humor. Without Liz, working with Alice would be impossible; with Liz, working with Alice and the entire production team at Simon and Schuster is a joy.

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Obviously, WordPerfect Spell Check doesn't work with the imaginative spelling of Lewis and Clark. I had my son Hugh, who has his M.A. in history from the University of Montana (where Harry Fritz was one of his teachers), check each quotation against the Moulton edition of the journals—a demanding task which he carried out splendidly. And I incorporated almost all his suggestions, ranging from questionable word choice to matters of interpretation.

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I thank all those who have joined us on one or another part of the Trail, sharing the trials, tribulations, and triumphs.

But most of all Moira and I owe more than can ever be repaid to our children and grandchildren whose enthusiasm for our outings never flags. They make us so proud and give meaning to our lives.

Together we have followed in the footsteps of Crazy Horse and Custer, Lewis and Clark—these were the best days of our lives. ~~Without our children, there would have been no book.~~

It is our dream that someday they will be taking their grandchildren on horseback over the Lolo, or canoe down the Missouri, or camping at Lemhi on the Fourth of July, and that for them it will be as it has been for us, the greatest experience of all, one that draws their families together as it has ours.

1. To join the Foundation and become a subscriber to *We Proceeded On*, write the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation, Inc., P. Box 3434, Great Falls, MT 59403.

Youth

1774–1792

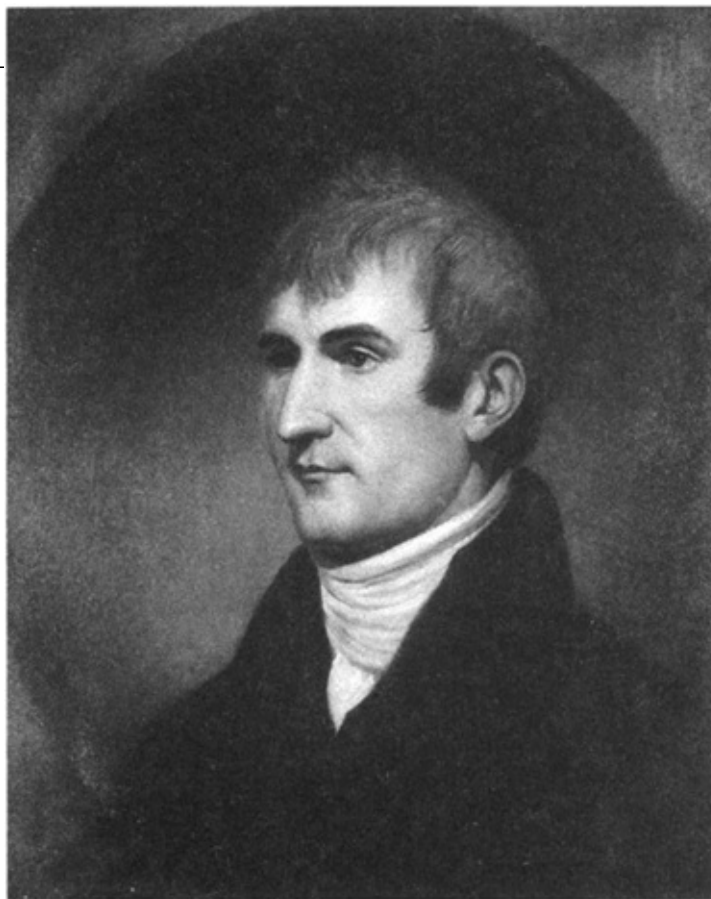
From the west-facing window of the room in which Meriwether Lewis was born on August 18, 1774, one could look out at Rockfish Gap, in the Blue Ridge Mountains, an opening to the West that invited exploration. The Virginia Piedmont of 1774 was not the frontier—that had extended beyond the Allegheny chain of mountains, and a cultured plantation life was nearly a generation old—but it was far removed. Traces of the old buffalo trail that led up Rockfish River to the Gap still remained. Deer were exceedingly plentiful, black bear common. An exterminating war was being waged against wolves. Beaver were on every stream. Flocks of turkeys thronged the woods. In the fall and spring, ducks and geese darkened the rivers.¹

Lewis was born in a place where the West invited exploration but the East could provide education and knowledge, where the hunting was magnificent but plantation society provided refinement and enlightenment, where he could learn wilderness skills while sharpening his wits about such matters as surveying, politics, natural history, and geography.

The West was very much on Virginians' minds in 1774, even though the big news that year was the Boston Tea Party, the introduction of resolutions in the House of Burgesses in support of Massachusetts, the dissolution of the Burgesses by the Royal Governor Lord Dunmore, and a subsequent meeting at the Raleigh Tavern of the dissolved Burgesses, whose Committee of Correspondence sent out letters calling for a general congress of the American colonies. In September, the First Continental Congress met in Philadelphia, and revolution was under way.

Lord Dunmore was a villain in the eyes of the revolutionaries. He was eventually forced to flee Virginia and take up residence on a British warship. But in January 1774, he had done Virginia a big favor by organizing an offensive into the Ohio country by Virginia militia. The Virginians goaded Shawnee, Ottawa, and other tribes into what became Lord Dunmore's War, which ended with the Indians defeated. They ceded hunting rights in Kentucky to the Virginians and agreed to unhindered access and navigation on the Ohio River. Within six months, the Transylvania Company sent out Daniel Boone to blaze a trail through the Cumberland Gap to the bluegrass country of Kentucky.

Meanwhile, the British government, in the Quebec Act of 1774, moved to stem the flow of Virginians across the mountains, by extending the boundary of Canada south to the Ohio River. This cut off Virginia's western claims, threatened to spoil the hopes and schemes of innumerable land speculators, including George Washington, and established a highly centralized crown-controlled government with special privileges for the Catholic Church, provoking fear that French Canadians, rather than Protestant Virginians, would rule in the Ohio Valley. This was one of the so-called Intolerable Acts that spurred the revolution.



Meriwether Lewis, oil (1807) by Charles Willson Peale. (Courtesy Independence National Historical Park)

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Meriwether Lewis was born on the eve of revolution into a world of conflict between Americans and the British government for control of the trans-Appalachian West in a colony whose western ambitions were limitless, a colony that was leading the surge of Americans over the mountains, and in a county that was a nursery of explorers.

His family had been a part of the western movement from the beginning. Thomas Jefferson described Lewis's forebears as "one of the distinguished families" of Virginia, and among the earliest. The first Lewis to come to America had been Robert, a Welshman and an officer in the British army. The family coat of arms was "Omne Solum Forti Patria Est," or "All Earth Is to a Brave Man His Country." (An alternate translation is "Everything the Brave Man Does Is for His Country.") Robert arrived in 1653 with a grant from the king for 33,333 1/3 acres of Virginia land. He had numerous progeny, including Colonel Robert Lewis, who was wonderfully successful on the Virginia frontier of the eighteenth century in Albemarle County. On his death, Colonel Lewis was wealthy enough to leave all nine of his children with substantial plantations. His fifth son, William, inherited 1,896 acres, and slaves, and a house, Locust Hill, a rather rustic log home, but very comfortable and filled with things of value, including much table silver. It was just seven miles west of Charlottesville, within sight of Monticello.²

One of the Lewis men, an uncle of Meriwether Lewis's father, was a member of the king's council; another, Fielding Lewis, married a sister of George Washington.³ Still another relative, Thomas Lewis, accompanied Jefferson's father, Peter, on an expedition in 1746 into the Northern Neck, between the Potomac and the Rappahannock. Thomas was the first Lewis to keep a journal of exploration. He had a gift for vivid descriptions, of horses "tumbling over Rocks and precipices," of cold, rain, and near starvation. He wrote of exultation over killing "one old Bair & three Cubs." He described a mountain area where they were so "often in the outmoust Danger this tirable place was Calld Purgatory." One riv

was so treacherous they named it Styx, “from the Dismal appearance of the place Being Sufficen to Stric terror in any human Creature.”⁴

In 1769, William Lewis, then thirty-one years old, married his cousin, twenty-two-year-old Lucy Meriwether. The Meriwether family was also Welsh and also land-rich—by 1730, the family held a tract near Charlottesville of 17,952 acres. The coat of arms was “Vi et Consilio,” or “Force and Counsel.” George R. Gilmer, later a governor of Georgia, wrote of the family, “None ever looked at or talked with Meriwether but he heard something which made him look or listen again.” Jefferson said of Colonel Nicholas Meriwether, Lucy’s father, “He was the most sensible man I ever knew.”⁵ He had served as commander of a Virginia regiment in Braddock’s disastrous campaign of 1755.

The Lewis and Meriwether families had long been close-knit and interrelated. Indeed, there were eleven marriages joining Lewises and Meriwethers between 1725 and 1774. Nicholas Meriwether (1667–1744), was the great-grandfather of Lucy Meriwether and the grandfather of William Lewis. The marriage of Lucy and William combined two bloodlines of unusual strength—and some weaknesses. According to Jefferson, the family was “subject to hypocondriac affections. It was a constitutional disposition in all the nearer branches of the family.”⁶

Despite William Lewis’s tendency toward hypochondria—or what Jefferson at other times called melancholy and would later be called depression—Jefferson described his neighbor and friend as a man of “good sense, integrity, bravery, enterprize & remarkable bodily powers.”⁷

A year after their marriage, William and Lucy Lewis had their first child, a daughter they named Jane. Meriwether Lewis was born in 1774. Three years later, a second son, Reuben, was born.

In 1775, war broke out. Jefferson noted that, when it came, William Lewis was “happily situated at home with a wife and young family, & a fortune placed him at ease.” Nevertheless, “he left all to aid in the liberation of his country from foreign usurpations.”⁸ Like General Washington, he served without pay; going with Washington one better, he bore his own expenses, as his patriotic contribution to his country.

Meriwether Lewis scarcely knew his father, for Lieutenant Lewis was away making war for most of the first five years of his son’s life. He served as commander of one of the first regiments raised in Virginia, enlisting in July 1775. By September, he was a first lieutenant in the Albemarle County militia. When the unit integrated with the Continental Line, he became a lieutenant in the regulars.

In November 1779, Lieutenant Lewis spent a short leave with his family at Cloverfields, a Meriwether family plantation where his wife, Lucy, had grown up. He said his goodbyes, swung onto his horse, and rode to the Secretary’s Ford of the Rivanna River, swollen in flood. Attempting to cross, his horse was swept away and drowned. Lewis managed to swim ashore and hiked back to Cloverfields, drenched. Pneumonia set in, and in two days he was dead.⁹

People in the late eighteenth century were helpless in matters of health. They lived in constant dread of sudden death from disease, plague, epidemic, pneumonia, or accident. Their letters always begin and usually end with assurances of the good health of the letter writer and a query about the health of the recipient. Painful as the death of an honored and admired father was to a son, it was a commonplace experience. What effect it may have had on Meriwether cannot be known. In any case, he was quickly swept up into his extended family.

Nicholas Lewis, William Lewis’s older brother, became Meriwether’s guardian. He was a heroic figure in himself. He had commanded a regiment of militia in an expedition in 1776 against the Cherokee Indians who had been stirred up and supported by the British. Jefferson paid tribute to his bravery and said that Nicholas Lewis “was endeared to all who knew him by his inflexible probity, courteous disposition, benevolent heart, & engaging modesty & manners. He was the umpire of all the private differences of his county, selected always by both parties.”¹⁰

Less than six months after his father's death, another man came into Meriwether's life. On May 1, 1780, ~~his mother married Captain John Marks. Virginia widows in those days commonly remarried as soon as possible, and family tradition has it that in marrying Captain Marks she was following the advice of her first husband, given as he lay dying.~~¹¹

Lucy Meriwether Lewis Marks was a remarkable woman. She bore five children, two by John Marks (John Hastings, born 1785, and Mary Garland, born 1788). She had a strong constitution; she buried two husbands and lived to be almost eighty-six years old. Jefferson called her a "tender" mother. She was slim, fragile in appearance, with light brown hair and hazel-blue eyes, "a refined face and a masterful eye." A family history described her: "Her position as a head of a large family connection combined with the spartan ideas in those stirring times of discipline, developed in her a good deal of the autocrat. Yet she . . . had much sweetness of character, was a devoted Christian and full of sympathy for all sickness and trouble."

Known far and wide for her medicinal remedies, she grew a special crop of herbs which she dispensed to her children, her slaves, and her neighbors. She also knew the medicinal properties of wild plants. She took care to teach her son all that she had learned about herbal remedies.

Stern and spartan though she may have been, her son loved her dearly. Although he was scarcely ever with her from age fourteen on, he was a faithful and considerate correspondent.

On March 31, 1805, he wrote her from "Fort Mandan, 1609 miles above the entrance of the Missouri" to relate to her some of his various adventures in ascending the river so far and to inform her that he was about to set off into the unknown. "I feel the most perfect confidence that we shall reach the Pacific Ocean this summer." It was going to be easy, he wrote, because everyone in the party was in good health and "excellent spirits, are attached to the enterprise and anxious to proceed."

Still, mothers will worry, so he added: "You may expect me in Albemarle [County, Virginia] about the last of next September twelve months. I request that you will give yourself no uneasiness with respect to my fate, for I assure you that I feel myself perfectly as safe as I should do in Albemarle; and the only difference between 3 or 4 thousands miles and 130, is that I can not have the pleasure of seeing you so often as I did while [I lived] at Washington."¹²

The woman who inspired such concern and love was also capable of leading an expedition of her own into the wilderness, of running a plantation, of supervising at hog-killing time. When some drunken British officers burst into Locust Hill one evening, she grabbed her rifle down from its peg and drove them off. Another time, a hunting party from Locust Hill and neighboring plantations got separated from the dogs. The hounds brought a buck to bay on the lawn at Locust Hill. Lucy grabbed her rifle, rushed out, and shot it. When the crestfallen hunters returned, empty-handed, the buck's hindquarters were already roasting over the fire.

She had a county-wide reputation for her culinary talents. Jefferson was especially fond of her cured Virginia hams. His overseer recorded, "every year I used to get a few for his special use." She had a small library, which she treasured. She valued it so much that she was careful to leave directions in her will for its equal division among her surviving children.

"Her person was perfect," said one of her male acquaintances, "and her activity beyond her sex." Even as an old lady, "Grandma Marks" was seen riding about Albemarle on horseback to attend the sick. According to a contemporary, in her mid-seventies she retained "refined features, a fragile figure, and a masterful eye."¹³

Georgia Governor George Gilmer described her: "She was sincere, truthful, industrious, and kind without limit." He added that "Meriwether Lewis inherited the energy, courage, activity, and good understanding of his admirable mother."¹⁴

As a child, Meriwether absorbed a strong anti-British sentiment. This came naturally to any son of a patriot growing up during the war; it was reinforced by seeing a British raiding party led by Colonel Banastre Tarleton sweep through Albemarle in 1781. Jefferson recorded: “He destroyed all my growing crops of corn and tobacco, he burned all my barns containing the same articles of last year, having first taken what he wanted; he used, as was to be expected, all my stocks of cattle, sheep and hogs for the sustenance of his army, and carried off all the horses capable of service; of those too young for service he cut the throats, and he burned all the fences on the plantation, so as to leave it an absolute waste. He carried off also about 30 slaves.”¹⁵

Tarleton also ordered all the county court records burned. This wanton act was roundly and rightly condemned by Reverend Edgar Woods in his 1932 history of Albemarle County: “It is hard to conceive any conduct in an army more outrageous, more opposed to the true spirit of civilization, and withal more useless in a military point of view, than the destruction of public archives.”¹⁶

When Meriwether was eight or nine years old, his stepfather, Captain Marks, migrated with a number of Virginians to a colony being developed by General John Matthews on the Broad River in northeastern Georgia. Few details of this trek into the wilderness survive, but it is easy enough to imagine a wide-eyed boy on the march with horses, cattle, oxen, pigs, dogs, wagons, slaves, other children, adults—making camp every night—hunting for deer, turkey, and possum; fishing in the streams running across the route of march; watching and perhaps helping with the cooking; packing up each morning and striking camp again; crossing through the Carolinas along the eastern edge of the mountains; getting a sense of the vastness of the country, and growing comfortable with life in the wilderness.

Meriwether lived in Georgia for three, perhaps four years. It was frontier country, and he learned frontier skills. He gloried in the experience. Jefferson later wrote that he “was remarkable even in infancy for enterprize, boldness & discretion. When only 8 years of age, he habitually went out in the dead of night alone with his dogs, into the forest to hunt the raccoon & opossum. . . . In this exercise no season or circumstance could obstruct his purpose, plunging thro’ the winter’s snows and frozen streams in pursuit of his object.”¹⁷

At about this time, according to family legend, eight- or nine-year-old Meriwether was crossing a field with some friends, returning from a hunt. A vicious bull rushed him. His companions watched breathless as he calmly raised his gun and shot the bull dead.¹⁸

Another favorite family story about Meriwether at a young age concerned an Indian scare. When one of the cabins was attacked, the transplanted Virginians gathered at another for defense. Then they decided they were too few to defend it from a determined attack and fled for concealment to the forest. As dusk came on, one hungry, not very bright refugee started a fire to cook a meal. The fire attracted the Indians. A shot rang out. The women shouted alarms, men rushed for their rifles, something close to a panic set in. In the general confusion and uproar, only ten-year-old Meriwether had sufficient presence of mind to throw a bucket of water over the fire to douse it, to prevent the Indians from seeing the white man silhouetted against the light of the fire.¹⁹ A family friend commented, “He acquired in youth hardy habits and a firm constitution. He possessed in the highest degree self-possession in danger.”²⁰

Curious and inquisitive as well as coolheaded and courageous, he delighted his mother by asking questions about her herbs and about wild plants that she used as nostrums. He wanted to know the names and characteristics of the trees, bushes, shrubs, and grasses; of the animals, the fish, the birds, and the insects. He wanted to know the why as well as the way of things. He learned to read and write, and

something of the natural world, from one of the adults in the Georgia community. An anecdote survives when told that, despite what he saw, the sun did not revolve around the earth, Meriwether jumped as high into the air as he could, then asked his teacher, “If the earth turns, why did I come down in the same place?”²¹



He wanted more knowledge. He could not get it in Georgia. And he was a youngster of considerable substance and responsibility, for under Virginia’s laws of primogeniture he had inherited his father’s estate. This included a plantation of nearly 2,000 acres, 520 pounds in cash, 24 slaves, and 147 gallons of whiskey. Though it was being managed by Nicholas Meriwether, it would soon be Meriwether’s to run. His mother agreed that he should return to Virginia, at about age thirteen, to obtain a formal education and prepare himself for his management responsibilities.

There were no public schools in eighteenth-century Virginia. Planters’ sons got their education by boarding with teachers, almost always preachers or parsons, who would instruct them in Latin, mathematics, natural science, and English grammar. Jefferson biographer Dumas Malone notes that “the sons of the greater landowners had all the advantages and disadvantages that go with private instruction. The quality of this instruction was often high, but it naturally varied with the tutors who were available.”²² These men were all overworked, their “schools” too crowded. Finding a place was difficult. Even with his guardian, Nicholas Lewis, and his father’s friend Thomas Jefferson to help him, it took Meriwether some months, perhaps as long as a year, to become a formal student.

His first extant letter, dated May 12, 1787, he addressed to his “Moste loving Mother.” Apparently he had not yet found a place. He began by complaining that he had no letter from his mother, then confessed: “What Language can express the Anxiety I feel to be with you when I sit down to write but that it is now a thing impossible I shall quit the Subject, and say nothing more about it.” He was glad to report that all the Lewises and Meriwethers in Albemarle were in good health. He passed on a rumor that “Cousin Thomas Meriwether is married,” and asked if she knew anything about it. He concluded, “I live in Hopes of recieving a letter from you by which as the only Means I may be informed of your Health and Welfair. I enjoy my Health at present which I hope is your situation. I am your ever loving Sone.”²³

Meriwether’s next surviving letter to his mother, undated, written from Cloverfields, related family news and the complications he was encountering in trying to get into school. His brother-in-law, Edmund Anderson, who had married his older sister, Jane, in 1785, when she was fifteen, was preparing to go into business in Richmond and “would have been there before this, had not the small-pox broke out in the City which rages with great violence and until this Disorder can be extirpated, they will continue where they are”—i.e., in Hanover. “Sister [Jane] and Children are well; the children have grown very much, but I see no appearance of another.”

Parson Matthew Maury, son of one of Thomas Jefferson’s teachers, was the man Meriwether wanted to study with, but so far he had not been able to get started. “I hope Reubin [his younger brother, still in Georgia] is at school tho I am not yet ingaged in that persuit myself,” he wrote. “Robert Lewis and myself applied to Mr. Maury soon after my return [to Albemarle] who informed us that he could not take us by any means till next Spring and as what we would wish to learn would interfer so much with his Latin business that he had rather not take us at all.”

Meriwether had therefore applied to Reverend James Waddell, but success was uncertain. “If we do not go to Mr. Waddle we shall certainly go to one Mr. Williamson a young Scochman who teaches in about ten Miles of this Place and who was earnestly recommended both by Mr. Maury and Waddle. In this situation I have now been waiting for this three Weeks past.”²⁴

In the fall of 1787, Reuben came to Cloverfields for a visit. As he was leaving, he asked Meriwether to come to Georgia the following fall. On March 7, 1788, Meriwether wrote Reuben to say he could not make the visit, “by Reason of my being at School. I set in with Parson Maury, soon after you left me, with whom I continued till Christmas, and then I fully expected to have stayed six Months longer at least, not another Year; but couzen William D. Meriwether then said he did not think it worth while, as I had got well acquainted with the English Grammer, and might learn the Georgraphy at Home. Upon this, I concluded to stay at Uncle Peachy Gilmers, and go to school to a Master in the Neighbourhood in Order to get acquainted with Figures, where I am now stationed.”

He hated not being able to visit Georgia: “I should like very much to have some of your Sport, fishing and hunting,” he told Reuben. But he was determined to improve himself and said he must “be doing something that will no Doubt be more to my advantag hereafter”—that is, getting an education.²⁵

In June 1788, Meriwether’s guardian paid seven pounds for room, board, and tuition. In January 1789 he paid thirteen pounds and in July another two pounds. That summer Meriwether was able to go to Georgia for a visit.

In the fall, he studied under Dr. Charles Everitt. His schoolmate and cousin Peachy Gilmer, five years younger than Meriwether, hated Dr. Everitt. According to Gilmer, he was “afflicted with very bad health of an atrabilious and melancholy temperament: peevish, capricious, and every way disagreeable. . . . He invented cruel punishments for the scholars. . . . His method of teaching was as bad as anything could be. He was impatient of interruption. We seldom applied for assistance, said our lessons badly, made no proficiency, and acquired negligent and bad habits.”

Young Gilmer described Meriwether as “always remarkable for perseveance, which in the early period of his life seemed nothing more than obstinacy in pursuing the trifles that employ that age; martial temper; great steadiness of purpose, self-possession, and undaunted courage. His person was stout and without grace, bow-legged, awkward, formal, and almost without flexibility. His face was comely and by many considered handsome.”²⁶

Meriwether loved to “ramble,” as Jefferson put it. Into the mountains, or to visit Jane and other relatives, or down to Georgia, a trip he made at least once on his own. Later in his life he met his mother’s half-joking complaints about his roving propensities with the laughing response that he had inherited this disposition from her.²⁷

Albemarle County records show that Meriwether’s guardian was meticulous. His accounts include the purchase of “1 pr Knee Buckls,” “10 Vest buttons,” “2 hanks Silk,” “1 Pin Kniff.” There are numerous entries for “pocet Money.” One arresting entry is for “1 quart Whiskey for Negroe Wench.” Another covers “1 Quart Rum & 1 lb Sugar.”²⁸

Meriwether transferred in 1790 to Reverend James Waddell, who was a great contrast to the ill-tempered Everitt. Meriwether called Waddell “a very polite scholar.” He wrote his mother in August, “I expect to continue [here] for eighteen months or two years. Every civility is here paid to me and leave me without any reason to regret the loss of a home of nearer connection. As soon as I complete my education, you shall certainly see me.”²⁹

In October 1791, he wrote his mother to report that he had received a letter from Uncle Thomas Gilmer (Peachy’s father) “which gives moste agreeable information of your welfare and my brother’s assiduity and attention at School.” He said he had just returned from a visit with his sister, Jane, who had shown him a letter their mother had written that summer. From it he learned that Captain Marks had died, leaving his mother once again a widow, with Reuben plus the two younger children to care for. Mr. Marks wanted Meriwether to come to Georgia to organize a move back to Virginia for her and her dependents.

“I will with a great deal of cheerfulness do it,” Meriwether wrote his mother, “but it will be out of my power soon[er] than eighteen Months or two years.” He promised her she would always have a home at Locust Hill and “you may rely on my fidelity to render your situation as comfortable as it is in my power.”³⁰

In April 1792, Meriwether wrote his mother that he had learned from her letters to Jane that she was anxious to return to Virginia that spring. “This together with my sisters impatience to see you has induced me to quit school and prepare for setting out immediately.” He had employed an artisan at Monticello to make a carriage for the trip; it would be ready by May 1. Meriwether needed to purchase horses and collect some money. “If I can not collect a sufficiency from the lands that are now due I shall dispose of my tobacco for cash in order to be detained as little time as possible. I shall set out about the 15th of May.”³¹

He did as promised, and by fall he had gone to Georgia, organized the move of his mother and his children and the slaves, animals, and equipment, and brought the whole back to Virginia, where he set up at Locust Hill and began his life as a planter and head of household.

•

Thus ended Meriwether Lewis’s scholarly career. What had he learned? Not enough Latin to use the language in his extensive later writings, nor any other foreign language. Not enough orthography ever to be comfortable or proficient with the spelling of English words—but, then, he lived in an age of freedom of spelling, a time when even so well read and learned a man as Jefferson had trouble maintaining consistency in his spelling. He did develop a strong, sprightly, and flowing writing style.

What he read can only be inferred from references in his writings, which indicate he read a little ancient history, some Milton and Shakespeare, and a smattering of recent British history. He was an avid reader of journals of exploration, especially those about the adventures of Captain James Cook.

He got his figures down pretty well, along with a solid base in botany and natural history. He picked up all he could about geography. He had achieved the educational level of the well-rounded Virginia gentleman who was somewhat familiar with the classics, reasonably current with philosophy. Only in the field of plantation affairs was he expected to be a specialist, and to that end Lewis now set out.

He may have done so with some regret, for he valued education highly. All his life he kept after Reuben and his half-brother, John Marks, and half-sister, Mary Marks, to make every effort and meet every expense to further their educations. The last paragraph of his March 31, 1805, letter to his mother, written from Fort Mandan, far up the Missouri River, reads: “I must request of you before I conclude this letter, to send John Markes to the College at Williamsburgh, as soon as it shall be thought that his education has been sufficiently advanced to fit him for that ceminary; for you may rest assured that as you regard his future prosperity you had better make any sacrifice of his property than suffer his education to be neglected or remain incomple[te].”³²

Perhaps as an eighteen-year-old he wished to continue his education, to attend the “ceminary” at William and Mary, but it could not be. He was responsible for his mother, his brother, John and Mary Marks, the slaves at Locust Hill, his inheritance. Instead of book learning at William and Mary, he was destined to learn from the school of the plantation. At age eighteen, he was the head of a small community of about two dozen slaves and nearly two thousand acres of land. His lessons from now on would be in management, in soils, crops, distillery, carpentry, blacksmithing, shoemaking, weaving, coopering, timbering, in killing, dressing, and skinning cattle and sheep, preserving vegetables and meats, repairing plows, harrows, saws, and rifles, caring for horses and dogs, treating the sick, and the myriad of other tasks that went into running a plantation.

At eighteen years, he was on his own. He had traveled extensively across the southern part of the United States. ~~He had shown himself to be a self-reliant, self-contained, self-confident teen-ager,~~ and was a young man who took great pride in his “perseverance and steadiness of purpose,” as Peach Gilmer had put it. His health was excellent, his physical powers were outstanding, he was sensitive and caring about his mother and his family. He was started.

Planter

1792–1794

Foaled, not born, Virginia planters were said to be. They would go five miles to catch a horse in order to ride one mile afterward.

As one scholar put it, “In a country without large settlements and where plantation seats were far apart, riding was not a matter of occasional diversion but daily necessity, and good horsemanship was taken for granted among the gentry.”¹ They had to be experts in the judging, feeding, breeding, and care of horses.

From the time he was able to sit astride a horse, Meriwether Lewis was a fine, fearless rider. He became an excellent judge of horses and an expert in their care. Jefferson, believing that the taming of the horse had resulted in the degeneracy of the human body, urged the young to walk for exercise. Lewis took his advice and became a great hiker, with feet as tough as his butt. As a boy and young man, he went barefoot, in the Virginia manner. Jefferson’s grandson claimed not to have worn shoes until he was ten. According to Jefferson, the young Lewis hunted barefoot in the snow.²

Like riding and hiking, dancing was taken for granted. Indeed, dancing was little short of a social necessity. “Virginians are of genuine blood,” said one traveler. “They will dance or die.” Like Jefferson, Lewis learned to dance the minuet, reels, and country dances at Reverend Maury’s school. One diarist wrote in the year of Lewis’s birth, “Any young gentleman, travelling through the Colony . . . is presumed to be acquainted with dancing, boxing, playing the fiddle, and small sword, and cards.”³ There is no evidence that Lewis learned to fiddle, but he knew the rest of the list.

By no means were all Virginia planters or their sons paragons of virtue. If there was high-minded and learned political talk around the table, and much idealism and protestation of devotion to the common good, there also were temptations often too strong for healthy, wealthy young men to resist.

Jefferson’s father died when he was a boy. Decades later, in a letter to his grandson, Jefferson wrote in a famous passage:

When I recollect that at 14 years of age the whole care and direction of myself was thrown on my self entirely, without a relative or friend qualified to advise or guide me, and recollect the various sorts of bad company with which I associated from time to time, I am astonished I did not turn off with some of them, and become as worthless to society as they were. . . .

From the circumstances of my position I was often thrown into the society of horseracers, cardplayers, Foxhunters, scientific and professional men, and of dignified men; and many a time I asked myself, in the enthusiastic moment of the death of a fox, the victory of a favorite horse, the issue of a question eloquently argued at the bar or in the great Council of the nation, well, which of these kinds of reputation should I prefer? That of a horse jockey? A foxhunter? An Orator? Or the honest advocate of my country’s rights?⁴

Quite possibly Jefferson talked to Lewis in the same Polonius-like style in which he wrote his

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